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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000547

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: CODEL SCHIFF MEETS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY REPS, RADIO
LIBERTY AND DETAINEE WIVES

REF: A. YEREVAN 546
[1](#)B. YEREVAN 485

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Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: U.S. Representatives Adam Schiff, Wayne Gilchrest, and Allyson Schwartz, accompanied by the Charge, met May 25 with representatives of civil society, USG-supported Radio Liberty, and wives of political detainees to solicit their views on the state of democracy following Armenia's March 1 post-election violence. Civil society representatives decried the absence of the rule of law and emphasized the need for urgent international pressure to roll back anti-democratic measures. Radio Liberty (RL) staff recounted GOAM efforts to curtail RL's coverage, and urged USG pressure to ensure media freedoms. Wives of detainees described their spouses' improved treatment, but noted the authorities were not making any effort to investigate the alleged crimes, which indicated they plan to hold the oppositionists indefinitely. CODEL meetings with the GOAM were reported septel. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) CODEL Schiff met May 25 with four local civil society representatives: Gegham Sargsian, Country Director of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Larisa Minasian, Executive Director of Open Society Institute (OSI) Armenia, Amalia Kostanian, Chairwoman of Transparency International Armenia, and Boris Navasardian, President of the Yerevan Press Club. Navasardian asserted that Armenia's leaders did not believe genuine media freedom existed anywhere in the world. Their instincts were for control and manipulation of media. He said Armenian television stations were completely under the control of the government or government-friendly oligarchs. Minasian decried the lack of due process and rule of law, noting that judges were punished by authorities for stepping the least bit outside of the government's wishes. She criticized international institutions (Council of Europe, OSCE, EU, U.S.) for not being more critical of Armenia in recent years. Minasian felt democracy, media, and rule of law had been even more gravely threatened since the State of Emergency was established, and that society had become highly polarized. She emphasized that international pressure on Armenia was critical right now, to roll back anti-democratic measures and establish clear red-lines about unacceptable government conduct. The international community must not be fooled by cosmetic reforms.

[1](#)3. (C) Kostanian echoed Minasian's comments more strongly, urging that international community pressure be maintained. She argued that international organizations' relatively positive statements about the February 19 elections abetted

Armenian authorities in consolidating their illegitimate grip on power. She insisted that the U.S., EU, OSCE, Council of Europe, and others, must be much tougher on the Armenian authorities' democratic failings. The international community should not bestow undeserved legitimacy on Armenia's sham democracy. To the CODEL's question of whether Western pressure would only push Armenia deeper into the arms of Russia, Minasian and Kotanian both replied that Armenia was already as deeply in Russia's orbit as it could get, and argued there was nothing more to lose on that score. Both described a situation of greatly increased insecurity for journalists and civil society in today's Armenia. Kostanian asserted that the West has never appreciated the depth and breadth of corruption in Armenia, both political and economic, and had long given undue praise.

¶4. (C) Gegham Sargsian noted he had been abroad for a number of years, working for NDI in several other Eurasian countries, most recently the Kyrgyz Republic, before returning to his homeland Armenia in 2007. He had expected Armenia to be more advanced democratically than Central Asia, but was dismayed to find it was not. He said that the 2008 election was as bad as any in Armenia's history, with the only difference being that authorities had been able to do the bulk of their manipulations, intimidation, vote-bribing, and other abuses well before election day, and out of the gaze of international observers. Sargsian said he was unsure whether the government could recover from the crisis of legitimacy brought on by the rigged election and government violence of March 1. He described the current political climate as dangerous. He predicted President Serzh Sargsian (no relation) may not be able to serve out his full five-year term. Sargsian felt that neither the government nor the opposition was interested in serious dialogue, and -- worryingly -- neither seemed to have a coherent strategy or

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endgame. He said that it was important that the West send a clear message that foreign aid was not unconditional, and bad behavior would not be rewarded. While Sargsian was not ready to call for MCC suspension, Kotanian chimed in that MCC should indeed be frozen -- otherwise MCC conditionality is nothing more than empty words.

¶5. (C) Congressman Schiff also met May 25 with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) acting Bureau Chief Armen Dulian and RFE/RL staff in their Yerevan office to assess the state of media freedoms in Armenia. According to staffers, RFE/RL -- as the only fully independent broadcast organization in Armenia since independence in 1991 -- has always been a source of friction for the GOAM. Dulian noted that Armenian politicians only seem to accept the station's critical and impartial reporting when they themselves are not in power. As a case in point, Dulian recalled how former President Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) had cut RFE/RL broadcasts while president, but now in the opposition LTP played the station's broadcasts at his rallies. In the current political crisis, each side had accused RFE/RL of being a mouthpiece for his rival.

¶6. (C) According to RFE/RL staff, since the 2007 parliamentary elections RFE/RL reporters had not been allowed to attend government press conferences, and last summer the GOAM ended RFE/RL's long format rebroadcasts on Armenia State Public Radio. (Note: RFE/RL does not have its own broadcast tower, and instead relies on other radio stations to pick-up and rebroadcast RFE/RL programming. End Note.) The GOAM blocked the station's website during the March 2008 State of Emergency (SOE), and the station's March on-air broadcasts were silenced when the GOAM forced the station's re-broadcasters to stop carrying RFE/RL programming during the 20-day SOE. Further, following the March 1 election violence, Armenia's police spokesperson blamed RFE/RL for the March 1 events. RFE/RL staff stated that the station was still able to broadcast only because of significant international support and U.S. Embassy interventions with the

GOAM. Dulian and RFE/RL staff encouraged Congressman Schiff to maintain USG pressure in order to ensure media freedoms in Armenia.

17. (C) While Congressman Schiff met with Radio Liberty, Congresswoman Schwartz and Congressman Gilchrist met with wives of opposition leaders and activists who had been jailed by authorities on dubious grounds. Present were the AmCit wife of Ter-Petrosian, s campaign manager (a former Armenian foreign minister and UN Ambassador), the wives of two senior party officials of the Armenian National Movement (Ter-Petrosian's former political party), and the wife of the former deputy director of the Matenaderan ancient manuscript museum, who had served as an election day polling place volunteer on Ter-Petrosian, s behalf. The women described their husbands' situations for the CODEL, as well as that of dozens of other political detainees. They reported that several political detainees had been beaten or abused in initial detention and police questioning, but that current prison conditions and detainee treatment were acceptable. Most detainees, families were able to visit once every two weeks. While some detainees had been denied access to either families or counsel in the early days of detention, all had by now been granted these privileges. The wives complained that the government appeared not to be making any real effort to investigate the alleged crimes, but rather seemed simply to want to hold the opposition figures indefinitely. The Members expressed sympathy for the plight of the detainees and their families.

18. (U) CODEL Schiff has not had an opportunity to clear this message.
PENNINGTON